History, BA Programme, Spring 2011
Aarhus University, Denmark

Global Environmental History.
Of Nature, Perceptions and Power

Wednesdays, 13-17, Building 1328, Room 026
Lecturer: Dr Jan-Henrik Meyer
Global Environmental History: Of Nature, Perceptions and Power

Jan-Henrik Meyer

The objective of this seminar is to provide a thorough introduction into environmental history from a global perspective. Starting out with a discussion about what environmental history is, what its goals and main themes are, the seminar will seek to provide an overview of core problems of human relations with the physical world that surrounds them. A chronological approach will be complemented by a thematic one, addressing issues such as resource limitations, pollution, nature protection and the rise of environmentalism, including the history of environmental policy and the environmental movement. The role of human perceptions of the natural world and human agency and power will be central issues.

Apart from the course reader, a textbook will be used: Radkau, Joachim 2008: Nature and Power. A global History of the Environment, Cambridge. This is available from the student bookstore.

Academic literature that is useful for the course and for developing your own ideas for your term paper will be placed on a shelf under my name in the library. There are a number of textbooks, excerpts from which I selected for the course reader. These include:


Please take a look at them. Academic journals relevant to the course are e.g. Environmental History, Environment and History. There are also a number of podcasts, that are interesting and accessible way to familiarise yourself with what is being discussed in the area of environmental history: e.g. http://niche-canada.org/naturepast, http://www.eh-resources.org/podcast/podcast.html, http://www.environmentalhistories.net/?cat=5, http://envirohistorynz.wordpress.com/podcasts-2/
Session 1: What is environmental history? [2 February 2011]

In this first session, we will discuss what is meant by "environmental history". We will establish its contents and scope, in particular its relation to world history. We will address its goals and purposes, its guiding concepts, its storylines and implicit value judgements as well as questions of periodisation. The second part of the session will be devoted to the history of the concepts of "pollution" and "environment". The goal is to become aware of the difference between analytical and contemporary concepts.

1.1. What is environmental history?

- Uekötter, Frank 2010: Thinking Big. The Broad Outlines of a Burgeoning Field, in: Uekötter, Frank (Ed.): The Turning Points of Environmental History, Pittsburgh, 1-12.

1.2. Core concepts: Pollution, ecology and the environment


Session 2: Ecology of subsistence [16 February 2011]

This session discusses human dependence on and interference with the natural environment. While hunters and gatherers already shaped their environment with the force of fire, agriculture transformed landscapes in a much more thorough fashion. We will address the ecological as well as the collective action problems that hunters, fishermen and farmers face, and will discuss the use of the much debated theory of the "tragedy of the commons" as an analytical approach.

2.1. From hunting and collecting to agriculture


2.2. Theory and environmental history: Tragedy of the commons?

  Presentation:_____________________
  Presentation:_____________________
  Presentation:_____________________

Session 3: Dealing with limited resources: Water, forests and power [23 February 2011]

This session discusses the ecological bottlenecks pre-industrial civilisations were facing – with regard to core resources such as forests and the management of water to ensure intensive farming. The classical comparison between China and Europe at the eve of industrial revolution is used to discuss whether and to what extent ecological reasons accounted for Europe's head-start towards industrialisation.

3.1. Shaping the pre-industrial world

3.2. Ecological bottlenecks – China vs. Europe

  Presentation:_____________________

- **Marks, Robert B.** 1996: Commercialization without Capitalism: Processes of Environmental Change in South China, 1550-1850, in: Environmental History 1: 1, 56-82.
  Presentation:_____________________

Session 4: Colonialism as a watershed? The biological unification of the planet [2 March 2011]

The fourth session focuses on the "biological unification of the planet", which did not only bring about an exchange of useful plants and animals across the Atlantic, but also carried with it lethal germs that wiped out indigenous populations in large numbers. The creation of new settler societies – e.g. in the Caribbean – relied to a great extent on the forced transportation of humans as well as on new modes of production. In the second part of the session we will devote to the slave trade and discuss an unanticipated consequence of slavery and sugar production, which limited European dominance in tropical America.

4.1. The age of European expansion


4.2. Slave trade and its hidden passengers

  Presentation:_____________________

Session 5: Industrialisation: Shifting towards non-renewable resources? [9 February 2011]

The fifth session discusses to what extent industrialisation meant a fundamental new departure towards fossil fuels. While there is ample evidence that the industrial revolution only brought about a slow transition in energy use, following Pfister's argument about the "1950s syndrome" the transition should rather be situated in the 20th century. The second part of the session will deal with Jean-François Mouhot's provocative comparison between slave-holding and the use of fossil fuels.

5.1. The industrial revolution – beyond bottlenecks or the end of sustainability?

- Pfister, Christian 2010: The "1950s Syndrome" and the Transition from a Slow-Going to a Rapid Loss of Global Sustainability, in: Uekötter, Frank (Ed.): The Turning Points of Environmental History, Pittsburgh, 90-118.

5.2. Energy consumption


Session 6: Problems of the modern world: Cities and air pollution [16 March 2011]

Session six zooms in on the urban environment of 19th and 20th century cities, focusing on air pollution. While urban air pollution has been an important problem in industrial cities since the advent of coal-burning, measures of pollution control have been slow to emerge. The session will discuss some of the reasons for this phenomenon, before moving on to the environmental problems of present-day conurbations, which will be presented as case studies.

6.1. The age of smoke

Session 7: Conservation and the limitations of scientific management [23 March 2011]

The seventh session discusses the conservation movement that emerged at the turn of the 20th century as a forerunner of environmental protection that only appeared in the 1970s. Nature conservation relied frequently on aesthetic ideals and notions of wilderness that led to specific patterns of what seemed worthy of protection. Towards the later part of the 20th century this earlier notion of conservation was increasingly replaced by scientific ideas. Nevertheless, the cases presented in the second half of the session illustrate that the capacity of scientific management to deal with complex ecological challenges is limited, in particular, when accommodating important economic interests.

7.1. Nature conservation


7.2. Dealing with complexity: the problems of conservation

  Presentation:
  Presentation:

Session 8: Environmentalism [30 March 2011]

The eighth session discusses the emergence of modern environmentalism in the 1970s, against the backdrop of the rapid economic and technological development in the postwar period. What accounts for the origins of the environmental movement, environmental protest and environmental policy? In order to better understand the contemporary fears and sentiments, in the second part of the session, we will analyse two texts that were very influential in shaping environmentalism in the 1970s.

8.1. Environmentalism


8.2. Source analysis

  Presentation:
  Presentation:
In the final session, we will summarise what we have learned throughout the course – with a view towards our assessment of current environmental debates and behaviour.

9.1. Analysing current environmental politics


9.2. The ambiguities of modern environmental consciousness

  Presentation:____________________